

*An interview in two parts to Kostis Velonis*

By Sotirios Bahtsetzis and Cecilia Canziani



Part 1

Cecilia Canziani: *The imagination of your work often stems from and refers to topic figures and moments of modern history, which agency has art in representing the political today?*

Kostis Velonis: Historical re-examination produces new meanings and associations and I am certainly more attached to the impossibilities of the historical facts that express the failures of ideologies. It seems increasingly important to link my sculptural practise with the notion of freedom that puts the individual in opposition to the collective manifestations and political groups. Indeed, my emphasis on historical facts relies upon my need to oppose individuality within ideological systems. Russian avant-garde for example has served as a laboratory for new art forms and styles but in fact but if we look at those works from a historical perspective, it is clear that they defend an authority proposed within the context of upgrading the state.

Sotirios Bahtsetzis: *You often use cheap and trivial materials to make sculptures, which look deliberately simple and economical of expression, however poetic, enigmatic or even uncanny. How does this simplicity negotiate the visual language of modernism and the theoretical (often utopian) quests of its various guises?*

KV: Modernity always had different aspects from region to region including social and political particularities but the most official part of modern movement, the elite of avant-garde had a preference for rationality and purity that was expressed through and industrial materials in which uniformity of design was more effective than any other process by hand. It is a fact that today we live in a world with designed mass-produced stuff, a postindustrial computopia. Using in my work ephemera and discarded materials that have no value for any form of normalization I pursue a condition of freedom. The choice of the specific material and its narrative seems to be the most immediate way to understand the geopolitical complexities of contemporary capitalism. By giving an emphasis on the craft side of a ready made object, I tend to resist to the language of capital accumulation. Craftsmanship means a kind of personal identification with the material.

CC: *There is an image that I always have in mind when I think of your work: is your studio in Athens is filled with works that were finished, or not, in progress, or on the way to be discarded. We could barely walk around the place, but there was parsimony in your gestures and in your attitude towards them. Also when you install you seem to look for an exactness in the relations between the pieces. When a piece is finished, how do you enter the process of production in your work?*

KV: There is a thin line between artistic work created in an artist's studio and the artisan's métier which is linked to questions of class consciousness. Artists as craftsmen are workers under the sense of a physical pain defined by a certain labor. They share with artisans a state of emergency and uneasiness about the final result while enjoying the process towards it. This simple fact define a route for a way of life almost similar between them. Artisan, sculptor or architect, in some cases you feel this paranoia of a father-figure maker. The notion of power can have a cosmological content, something that functions as a principle of order and inhabit the ordinary practices of life. If all this seems convincing I can easily explain what is the structure that defines the foundation of ideologies and so on. Normally a studio based production of works reflects these power relations, not necessarily among humans but between objects and subjects that offer the gesture of hierarchical discourse to the human environment. Objects then become cultural representations of values which unconsciously define ways of belief.

SB: *You often talk about the 'contemporary decorative minimalism' as being pivotal to our lifestyle. Is this a symptom of the current aesthetic of power, the worship of the absolute functionalism and utilitarianism? How does your work criticize this condition?*

KV: I found myself to have the same attitude of the french film director Jaques Tati whose movies betray a certain disbelief to the fashionable style of modern architecture, which is finally not so functional as the ideology of modernity pretends to be. 'Modernism solutions' are usually 'infected' by a colonial logic and

produce standard meaning for the consumers or the art viewers. It is not only the history of modernity but the contemporary production of art that follows the modernist paradigm.

CC: *Your works often have very complex non descriptive and almost narrative titles. Similarly, most recently for the Lyon Biennial, you included a photograph and a song as part of the piece you presented: what is the relation that the text –word, image or sound – creates with the work? How does it inform its reception and reading?*

Although they look abstract at first glance, my sculptures are very attached to specific realities. They are symbolic topographies or objects, and suggest meaning through various signs and specific information. Photography, music or even drawing sometimes are used as footnotes to the final result as well as the way to my thinking process. They are hints or even better the keys for the viewer to get in my mind, to understand my intentions. I strive to produce concepts through sculpture. At the Lyon biennale i showed a sculpture which is a parody of the *Neuer* (New Man), one of El Lissitzky's figures design for the Electro-Mechanical Show *Victory over the Sun*. The piece stands in a motor which rounds lazily and pathetically while at the same moment we are listening the folk song *I see a darkness* written by Will Oldham. American plots of love and fear are melting with the mechanical movement of the three-dimensional anachronistico-futurist figure which represents the constructivist utopia for Communism. But the country song undermines the triumphalism of the automaton, this time recorded by Johnny Cash, which express a certain fragility in front of a coming "darkness". For the work *Stalin relaxing at his Dacha* I put discreetly on the wall a documentation of Stalin during 30's where he is literally is seating at his bed reading a book. It is like a family snapshot which upgrades the human profile of the soviet tyrant. It is of course a complementary note that allows the viewer to understand the formal positions of the sculptural representation of Stalin's relaxing.

SB: *Your work is subtly universal as it refers discreetly to seminal moments of the 'human condition' and the existential background of angst –which is integral to the modernist subject. Does the concept of the latent, the incomplete, the dysfunctional, express contemporary subjectivity? Which is your proposal for a change or negotiation?*

KV: Despite major differences in approaches and interests between artists, their arguments are based in a timeless condition, so the work doesn't mean necessarily that focuses to the audience of the date of production. I think human condition is always deliberately open to associations that are beyond any idea of contemporaneity or historicity. And beyond any categorisation within a psychoanalytical context the angst becomes a creative force as also the state of sadness. My pieces as "cultural objects" refer to the psychology of the emigrants, the disappointed, those who are generally unable to be happy but in general terms they have the intention to provide situations which are common for every person.

SB: *I have the impression that your sculptures have a ritualistically theatrical presence, in which they often determine the space in which they are presented. It is such as elements of scale, the texture of the materials in the given space and the lighting of the architectural shell that create a first framework in which to perceive them; how important are these elements?*

KV: It is not my intention to create a theatrical environment. It is maybe the narrative aspect and the synthetic logic of objects that permit these kinds of associations. The most important aspect in my work is to find the right way for its display in relation to its own intentionality. But after all I prefer to be apathetic to curatorial or exhibitional discourse. Art should be able to speak independently and not because of a certain kind of successful use of interior design. This over concern with exhibition design remind me the way that societies produce meanings through spectacular practises in the service of consumerist display.

CC: *What will you show at Monitor?*

KV: The starting point of the exhibition in Monitor gallery is the first manifesto of the Bauhaus written by Gropius and specifically his calling for an appeal to the educated artist to learn a craft and to abandon the class distinction between artist and craftsman. Gropius imagined for the Bauhaus a future which is based in an imaginary past. The cathedral by Feininger that illustrates the cover of Bauhaus manifesto, views modernity through the messianic vision for a community of craftsmen. His woodcut with the sharp lines reminds me of "Bauhaus cathedral DIY". The exaggerated construction of the sculpture allows me to understand the romantic, the national and the legendary as the foundation for modern regeneration.

*Craft makes the universe* investigates the representation of the universe as a stage for a crafty experience.

But the *Craft Boy* exhibition is not concerned only with the ideological field of Bauhaus school in its first days. Two other sculptures are focusing to the Russian constructivism: *Lissitzky was a craftsman hero* and *All peasants on alert* offering a kind of folklore with stories reminding a pro modernist past.

*All peasants on alert* plays with the possibilities of the peasant class to resist to the industrialised worker, as modernisation in soviet union was an extremely violent plan. I was influenced by the cover of "Sovremennaiia Arkhitektura" (1930, no 3) in which a fragment from Engels is displayed on the cover of the publication "The total liberation of humanity from the chains of the past can take place only through the destruction of the opposition between town and village". The work functions as a metaphor of a space of transition from the agricultural society to the industrialised one. I focus in this period where millions of people traveled around the country in order to supply urgently needed labor. The construction offers a logic of juxtaposition between the peasant which as a folk tale, could deny the possibility for its departure to urban centers. The assemblage from various types of wood and the rigid geometric structure of the main part of the piece make visible the industrial transformation. Bridges between the parts of the construction make connections to the communicative network of bolshevism.

*Continues..*

